

Interim Evaluation of the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education Synthesis Report

I. Brief Overview of the Laboratory

SERVE (Southeastern Regional Vision for Education) was established in 1990 to improve educational opportunities and offerings in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi. In the national competition conducted by the U.S. Department of Education that year, it replaced an organization named SEIL that formerly was the educational Laboratory for the region. Just under a decade old, SERVE is thus the third youngest regional educational Laboratory in the system, just behind those Labs first funded in this current cycle (1995). SERVE is in its second contract period, and a mid-contract evaluation is legislatively required.

The evaluation visit to SERVE's Greensboro, N.C. offices took place May 10-14, 1999. The members of the peer review panel engaged by the evaluation contractor, DIR (Decision Information Resources of Houston, TX), were Joyce Stern (Chair), Barbara Clements, Marilyn Willis Crawford, Kerry Davidson, Robert Egbert and Nancy Karweit. U.S. Department of Education (USED) representatives at the site were Carol Chelemer (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI], the unit that funds and administers the Laboratory program) and Deborah Williams (Office of Educational Research and Improvement [OERI]). Extensive background materials produced by SERVE and whose selection was determined jointly by SERVE and DIR were supplied to the panel prior to the site visit and were reviewed using the DIR rating sheets.

For four days, the panel as a group heard presentations, interviewed staff, met recipients

of SERVE programs, and further examined materials. Two unscheduled meetings took place involving panel representatives. The first was with Elizabeth Byrom, Director of the Technology in Learning program. Panel members Barbara Clements and Nancy Karweit requested the meeting (Chelemer and Williams also attended). The second concerned data gathering issues. Clements and Karweit, joined by Joyce Stern, directed questions to Charles Ahearn, head of the Publications and Quality Assurance unit and Jerry Natkin, SERVE's Director of Evaluation. In sum, sufficient documentation, information, and answers were provided to illuminate the major initiatives conducted by the Lab and allow the panel to address the key evaluation questions developed by DIR. On the fifth day of its visit, the Panel summarized its findings at an exit interview addressed to SERVE staff.

SERVE, the regional educational Laboratory (REL), is a part of the umbrella organization SERVE, Inc., a non-profit corporation. Of this year's nearly \$12 million budget for the corporation, the REL makes up \$6.8 million, or about 58 percent. The Lab is considered to be the "core business of SERVE" so that all the projects within the organization are intended to complement the work of the REL. Other initiatives and projects represent activities SERVE is authorized to perform under various contracts. These include USED awards to conduct the SouthEast and Islands Regional Technology in Education Consortium (SEIR*TEC), the National Center for Homeless Education, the Eisenhower Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education, the Comprehensive School Reform Development (CSRD) project, the Charter Schools Institute, and other activities.

Lab and non-Lab projects are combined administratively into six program offices: assessment, accountability and standards; children, families, and communities; education policy; improvement in science and mathematics; school development and reform; and technology in

learning; plus one initiative (teachers and teaching). These are headed by the deputy executive director for programs. The technology services, publishing and quality assurance, evaluation, and new projects “greenhouse,” will shortly be overseen by a newly hired deputy executive director for planning and development. Both deputies report to the executive director who in turn is responsible to the Board of Directors. In the present REL contract, an Executive Management Team (the executive director, the two deputy executives, the director of operations, and the executive assistant) now leads the organization. This organizational structure was created by the current director’s (interim) predecessor, who replaced a “flat” structure in which the executive director oversaw all activities. The present executive director, John Sanders, filled several key vacancies, including the two deputy positions, since he joined SERVE less than a year ago.

The SERVE Board of Directors, which meets twice annually and has conference calls at least quarterly, has 40 members—six from each state plus three former teachers of the year, and a representative of the Native American Education Council. All expected constituencies have a place on the Board as well as on its advisory committees. Each state is represented by its governor (or designee), chief state school officer (or designee), a state legislator, a corporate executive, a regional- or state-based corporation representative, and an educational researcher. The term is for three years. Current Chair is Alabama corporate executive, Al Knight. The panel’s telephone interview with the Executive Committee of the Board revealed not only its members’ knowledge of Lab operations, but that they had an intimate understanding of SERVE programs and were committed to its success. Committee members uniformly praised SERVE for the sensitive manner in which regional needs were reflected in finely tailored educational initiatives, e.g., introducing “best practices” from other parts of the nation, and for serving as an

objective and neutral observer for policymakers on controversial issues. As one Board member phrased it, “SERVE is the expert, not the advocate.”

SERVE is a part of the University of North Carolina higher educational system and its principle offices are located on the UNC Greensboro campus. It is the only Lab associated with a public institution of higher learning. It is also the first Lab to house a policy analyst in each of the state capitals, and the first to utilize a decentralized (“distributed”) administrative approach. SERVE now has a staff of 90 located in three major offices in Atlanta, Greensboro and Tallahassee and in programmatic offices spread throughout the six states. Specific projects augment staff by adding consultants or subcontracting work to training and marketing firms. SERVE’s decentralized structure was designed to permit the organization to quickly respond to schools, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the region. Interactive technology, from conference calls to desktop video, keeps the far-flung locales connected. SERVE maintains an internet site in which each program can be accessed from the home page. Links to other sites, such as other regional Labs and federal research centers conducting work in related areas, also are provided on the web page.

Approximately 6.6 million students are enrolled in the elementary and secondary schools of the region. At \$32,100, teacher salaries in the region fall below the U.S. average of \$37,600. Georgia has the highest at \$34,000, while Mississippi has the low of \$27,600. Compared with the nation as a whole, the Southeast has a higher percent of 5-17 year olds below the poverty line (24 percent vs. 19 percent), a higher percentage of minority students (41 percent vs. 35 percent), a higher percent of the population living in rural areas (25 percent vs. 20 percent), a lower percent of the population with four years of high school (77 percent vs. 81 percent), and lower annual expenditures per pupil in K-12 public schools (\$4,900 vs. \$5,700) ranging from \$5,300 in

Florida to \$4,000 in Mississippi. (Source: SERVE/NCES data handout revised 5/11/99).

Regional information is important to understand as it affects the way SERVE approaches its work and determines the issues it focuses on. The Laboratory's articulated mission is to "promote and support the continuous improvement of education opportunities for all learners in the Southeast." Further, SERVE is guided by a vision of "a world in which all persons are members of productive learning communities that contribute to the continuous improvement of the quality of life." To this end, SERVE hopes to foster a culture of learning in those schools with which it partners. The SERVE technical proposal argued that any work in the Southeast must address issues of regional attitudes, poverty and demographic isolation. SERVE's work of service to the field and applied research focuses on strategies to address these concerns. In particular, extended collaborations were proposed to overcome the effects of isolation. Building local capacity to define and address problems in education through systematic reform and scaling up of effective practices is further seen as a way to overcome economic and attitudinal constraints.

The remainder of this report uses a format designed by DIR to describe the panel's observation of SERVE's relative success in addressing its stated plans. It also points out areas that the panel felt needed improvement or that otherwise could be strengthened as the Lab pursues its mission, and suggests appropriate changes.

II. Implementation and Management

A. To what extent is the REL doing what it was approved to do during its first three contract years?

1. Strengths

Except for certain documented modifications, SERVE has followed the programmatic plan put forth to OERI in its original technical proposal for the current contract period. It has done so in the face of sometimes extreme management difficulties including an unwieldy administrative structure and turnover of key personnel, including the resignation of its original executive director (one of its founders) two years ago. These challenges sometimes impeded progress (as was evident in the 1996 and 1997 quarterly reports), but most activities seem currently on track. This success in the face of adversity is a testament to staff dedication to an ethos of service, to the commitment of its Governing Board, which is actively involved in the affairs of the REL, and to the unwavering support of the University of North Carolina whose provost, Edward Uprichard, one of the founders of SERVE, participated in the panel's visit.

SERVE is clearly a client-oriented organization, responding to as many requests as possible. One particular area where this orientation can be seen is in the already noted placement of a senior policy analyst in each of the state education agencies. Hired with the approval of the chief state school officer (CSSO), each policy analyst assists the chief and other state officials by doing research, developing policy briefs, and advising on cross-state issues, often with the assistance of the other policy analysts. All have doctorates and research backgrounds. As they network with each other, interact with SERVE program officers, and participate in the Lab's quality assurance (QA) process, their views and influence pervade the organization. Their role is reactive, responding to requests from policymakers; and also proactive, as they serve on pivotal

committees and maintain key relationships that allow them to help shape policy agendas. This arrangement has afforded SERVE a continuous presence in state policy circles, while providing a conduit of information on evolving policy priorities within and across the states. Many positive statements were made to the panel, e.g., by Board members, concerning the important role of these policy analysts, such as that they are “neutral” and “objective.”

Another strength of the Lab is its evident capacity to “establish networks, strategic alliances, and partnerships with other RELs, other institutions, and key individuals and other organizations in the region” (DIR Indicator). Indeed, collaboration primarily for conducting special projects of interest to individual states, is characteristic of SERVE; there are few activities that the Lab seems to carry out solo. This is the hallmark of a strong institution seeking to maximize its effectiveness and stretch its dollars. A few examples must suffice:

The SERVE/University of Southern Florida Dropout Prevention Collaborative yielded a report of successful dropout prevention programs.

- SERVE organized a consortium of superintendents and school leadership teams to share ideas on how to build school cultures for long-term school improvement efforts (SERVE-Leads).
- With the North Carolina Public School Forum, SERVE seeks to extend the concept of school/business partnerships to more and more communities.
- Class size emerged as hot issue on both coasts last year. Both the WestEd REL and SERVE responded--the former with an issue paper for the California legislature and the latter with a publication for general audiences, *Does Class Size Make a Difference?--Recent Findings from State and District Initiatives*. It proved very popular. Information the Labs exchanged (as documented in briefing materials) contributed to the quality and usefulness of both products.
- The LNP Assessment Toolkit for Professional Developers is a major example of cross-Lab collaboration nationally. Initiated in the last contract period by the NCREL Lab, this instrument is used to train trainers of teachers in developing assessments pegged to standards. A mature product and part of SERVE’s Signature Work #1, it is employed by the Laboratory in a number of venues.

- Each school/teacher/principal/district/official involved with the REL can come to regard SERVE as a partner in its endeavors (if those interviewed on site or those quoted in REL publications are representative). It is commendable that SERVE manages to bring its considerable expertise onto a given site and yet consistently not impose its views, but instead gain the trust of clients there. Thus the Lab is permitted to stay for extended periods, enabling an intervention to take hold and mature, thereby increasing the likelihood of effectiveness and sustainability.

Such examples illustrate yet another Laboratory achievement. In a very short time, SERVE has created a powerful infrastructure for wide-scale impact across its service region. With highly trained policy analysts advising top state officials in every state, SERVE has the ability to impact policy formulation, while with its strong professional development and training infrastructure created by program-level personnel, the organization also can impact implementation in a major way. It does the latter by hosting conferences, providing training, developing and disseminating materials, and otherwise supporting state education departments, districts, schools and teachers in their work. Moreover, the organizational structure allows the Lab to be responsive to different states, and facilitates information dissemination across states.

2. Areas of needed improvement

Several panel members felt that the strengths just noted could be considerably enhanced with greater internal (a) substantive communication and (b) coordination/collaboration between projects, within programs, and across programs. After meetings with staff, some members felt that obvious “content connections” are not being made, nor are there structures in place to encourage staff to discuss their activities so as to promote collaboration and coordination. For instance, while there would seem to be a content connection between the alternative assessment school projects and the Senior Project, a distinct alternative assessment, the panel heard no evidence that one informs the other. Yet experience from the assessment project could feed into training on the Senior Project, particularly as a district looks to widely adopting Senior Project-

type activities.

Similarly, the Assessment, Accountability and Standards Program seems to operate in relative isolation from the School Development and Reform Program, except for joint planning of a conference for low-performing schools. Clients of school development projects who the panel interviewed said they did not know about the Lab's alternative assessment activities. In short, obvious linkages do not seem to be readily and adequately acknowledged. Linkages also seem to be missing between REL and non-REL funded activities, such as between the Technology in Learning project and the SEIR*TEC program. Finally, various activities do not benefit from collaboration around the most important issue—student achievement (see B.2.below).

3. Recommendations for improvement

The Executive Management Team should set aside staff time directed toward determining where logical linkages occur and where collaboration could be beneficial. Seminars, monthly luncheons, or other low-key mechanisms for instituting information exchange of a programmatic and substantive nature could start the process. Upgraded technology should permit staff in Atlanta and Tallahassee to participate fully. Indeed, events in this activity could emanate from these two cities as well as from Greensboro. This exercise also could help shape evaluation parameters of how well the Lab is serving its clients plus guide long-term planning. A parallel approach would be to hire an outside facilitator to help identify ways to collaborate that are consistent with palatable organizational change.

B. To what extent is the REL using a self-monitoring process to plan and adapt activities in response to feedback and customer needs?

(Note: The needs assessment aspect of this issue is dealt with below in Question IV. B.)

1. Strengths

The Lab is strongly conscious of customer satisfaction and engages in a continuous process of monitoring in order to more effectively serve its diverse customers. The REL incorporates evaluation in its customer service projects on a regular and ongoing basis with the help of the evaluation unit. Single event monitoring routinely takes place as a source of immediate feedback to on-site project staff. And staff debriefings focus on how well the clients were served and what could be done to improve. Indeed, responsiveness to customers is one of the major overall strengths of this Laboratory. That is probably one reason why SERVE's work is so well received and why in its short life it has won the praise and confidence of state department officials, its Board, and its clients. Data from the evaluation unit provided to the panel ahead of time, as well as data exhibited at the briefing on site illustrated a generally high level of overall customer satisfaction across all programs. The distributed organization and the roles of the policy analysts also contribute to continuous self-monitoring.

Quality assurance (QA) for publications prior to completion and dissemination is highly evolved. The publishing unit provided flowcharts and stepwise summaries illustrating the close attention paid to ensuring quality. This is evidenced in the products: Most REL publications and the two videos the panel saw on teacher assessment and on the use of technology in assessment were generally thoughtful and well written/scripted and reflected the Lab's effort invested on the front end. The dissemination data also revealed that most products were in demand and had received wide distribution. Reflective of the quality standard SERVE strives for and often achieves is that the publication, *Achieving Your Vision of Professional Development* was named "Book of the Year" in 1998 by the National Council on Staff Development (NCSD). This publication is one example, among others, of high quality use of research, involvement of strong

expertise from the research community working with practitioners, and is a high quality exemplar for the region.

2. Areas of needed improvement

- Several panel members felt the evaluation process needed to become “more formal and more rigorous.” Most feedback comes from clients who use the Lab’s services, participate in development of Lab products, or attend its training sessions and seminars. This feedback focuses on satisfaction and the design often falls short of identifying ways to improve a product or strategy. Most significantly, the panel found little evidence of external monitoring and evaluation.
- Nor is there evidence of consistent, rigorous monitoring of student achievement and student success data. If incorporated at all, these outcome measures are added late in the process, once the product or process is in a final or close-to-final stage, or once it has been in use. For example, the Senior Project which has been adopted and dispersed in a number of schools and districts, is not undergoing rigorous scrutiny in relation to student test score changes. Nor is an evaluative effort underway to identify distinguishing characteristics and issues of students who are successful in completing the project versus those who fail or do poorly.
- In this context but viewed from a wider angle, SERVE did not appear to have analytical processes in place to learn from its own programmatic failures and the limitations of what it has been promoting. The focus throughout the site visit was on successes, with little reference to how staff must continuously be struggling with the complexity of teaching “all students” to achieve at high levels.
- Finally, several members of the panel felt that the Lab used the term “research” in a very broad, unrestricted sense. Yet people in the field are making major choices based on the assumption that what the Lab tells them to do and use has an inherent guarantee of success because it is “research-based.” Under present circumstances, this is risky. One panel member spoke for the others when she wrote:

There was a wide range of understanding [at SERVE] of what constitutes “research”: the term was applied to experts used to give advice, to the act of searching to find sources of information, to staff observations gleaned informally from projects in the field, and to practical projects in the field that seemed to be working. The complication with this approach is that the research support base becomes naturally overstated, implying effects well beyond the scope of evidence (emphasis added). Quality control processes that would allow the Lab to distinguish products, processes, and practices that

have strong empirical support from those that have little—or are appropriate only in particular instances with particular groups, for example—are missing.

3. Recommendations for improvement

- Institute a rigorous, external and totally independent quality control process, linked with increased internal QA.
- Build ways to define and gather student and school success data at the construction phase rather than at the end of development, and/or utilization of Lab products and services. See it as a goal (with steps toward its attainment), rather than a by-product (of teacher training or other reforms).
- Build in critical analyses that might allow adaptations, changes, and growth of a given program to make it better or to learn how to target and adapt the existing program for particular populations.
- When screening materials and programs that might shape or be used in Lab projects, limit the term “research-based” to empirically supported programs and those grounded in data-driven, demonstrated student success. Add understanding of their strengths and limitations, the limitations of the literature-based knowledge, and the levels of tentativeness that are inherent in the term “research-based.” There is a need to be vigilant because of the scalability factor in the infrastructure—one must refrain from disseminating anything with less than full honesty about its potential for success. The scope of adding this level of rigor is obviously beyond the reach of current staffing and organizational mechanisms and will need to be done through an external system of networks or evaluators, or through a combination of internal-external controls.

III. Quality

To what extent is the REL developing high quality products and services?

1. Strengths

The SERVE Laboratory deserves high marks for carrying out a “coherent and sustained program of work” (DIR indicator). With a comparatively small staff, augmented as needed by consultants, SERVE has generated many useful products, conducted pilots, held conferences of critical importance to the region, and gone into schools that needed or agreed to be part of a sustained intervention effort. This is evidenced by the range of quality products and services that

make up its two Signature Works, the first relating to the topical areas of assessment, accountability, and standards, and the second to broader comprehensive school improvement thrusts. Since there is no “one way” to approach either assessment or school reform, the Lab correctly has adopted a multi-prong strategy. The panel had the opportunity to examine a large sample of the publications and to read about the services as well as listen to formal presentations by program directors and a dozen or so satisfied “clients.”

All states in the region in recent years have focused on developing content standards. Signature Work #1 addresses this development on a number of fronts within the Office of Assessment, Accountability, and Standards. First, the Assessment Toolkit, presented at conferences and in sessions for trainers, shows how assessments may be constructed. Its popularity reflects the high need for such a “cookbook.” Using this and other materials developed in-house, SERVE trained 3,500 teachers in a four-day session on how to develop an assessment aligned with a standard. For a much more in depth, R&D effort, SERVE has partnered with nine “intensive site” school districts to demonstrate how assessment can be an instrument for reform, using assessments as a teaching device to help a child learn and equally to help a teacher teach better. While focused on professional development, the whole-school approach also features the essential corollaries of developing local leadership, principal training, and school-based assessment teams. The strategy is spelled out in the user-friendly SERVE publication, *Using Accountability as a Lever for Changing the Culture of Schools*, done in collaboration with one of its R&D school sites.

The panel met several clients representative of those participating as partners in this effort, all of whom felt that this challenging approach was transforming their teaching and the way they even thought about teaching. A mature SERVE collaboration with the Bay County

Schools of Panama City, Florida was invited by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) to be part of its Assessment Consortium, a singular honor. In yet another example, SERVE has promoted the use of the aforementioned Senior Project, a kind of hands-on culminating assessment developed and proven elsewhere. The panel interviewed enthusiastic teachers and students who were part of this effort at pilot sites. In yet one more variant, the panel received a SERVE video, *Technology as a Tool for Student Assessment*, which portrayed three dramatically different and innovative ways in which schools in the region used assessment as a learning device.

Signature Work #2 addresses whole school reform and operates out of the Office of School Development and Reform. Here, too, several strands make up the effort: short-term training programs, publications, e.g., *Resources for School Improvement*, conferences, and work with low-performing schools. Major SERVE resources have gone into its three (annual) successful School Improvement Forums, its Southern States Seminar on Low-Performing Schools, its assistance to Title I schools needing to design a “whole school” approach, and its programmatic assistance to schools seeking to benefit from the CSRD legislation. Again, the panel got the opportunity to meet enthusiastic school staff who had been assisted in some way by one of SERVE’s school improvement strategies. (See also relevant comments under II. A. and B., above.)

2. Areas of needed improvement

The extent to which SERVE-assisted school reform efforts (#2) reflected awareness of standards, assessment, and accountability (#1) was absent in what the panel heard or read. It may be a “given,” but then the connection needs to be spelled out. See the critique on collaboration (II. A.), above. Panel members with certain content expertise felt that some

Signature Work materials did not reflect familiarity with the most current relevant research. The panel was concerned that a given intervention/initiative/strategy be based on the most robust research possible. This issue is elaborated in the recommendations under II. B., above. Finally, demands placed on Lab resources by the Title I requirements and by the CSRD suggest that these efforts may be understaffed.

3. Recommendations for improvement

- Expand collaboration as described earlier, to enhance programmatic quality.
- For planned interventions, reach beyond the region to ensure they reflect the most current thinking and research in the field. Use of outside content experts, not necessarily from the region (depending on the issue), is critical to ensure accuracy and timeliness of information being imparted. Also, by consulting more outside reviewers SERVE might be better guided to build on work done elsewhere rather than create duplicative products.
- For publications, add to an already robust QA system the best content experts in a given field to ensure the validity of information in all documents, videos, etc. bearing SERVE's name.
- Add staff to ensure the Lab can continue to meet its obligations under the contract, particularly in the area of Title I and CSRD activities.

IV. Utility

A. To what extent are the products and services provided by the Laboratory useful to and used by customers?

1. Strengths

The evidence abundantly points to Lab products and services that are “useful to and used by customers in appropriate settings” (DIR indicator). There is no lack of examples from the materials sent for panel review, for this REL is not only prolific, but evidently knows its audience (see B., below). The Lab regularly seeks the reactions of its customers and clients in post-intervention surveys and questionnaires. Reactions are uniformly positive to both

publications and services. Written feedback from Signature Work # 1 and #2 users and partners was glowing—as were testimonials from representative clients invited for the panel’s on-site visit. They repeatedly said that they did not know how they could have done this [assessment or reform] work without SERVE’s guidance and assistance. Regarding the Senior Project, for example, one said, “... [It] has changed the culture of the school system by focusing attention on the process by which all children can leave public education as critical thinkers, collaborative workers, and productive citizens.... This starts in Kindergarten.” There were praises also for the organization’s reliability. As another client observed, “SERVE is here every year—it doesn’t go away.”

Utilization statistics (materials disseminated, web-site “hits,” conference/training attendance) testify to a high degree of regional awareness of the Laboratory and the popularity of the full range of its products in all their variety and scope. Regarding the latter, in addition to abundant print material, the panel was given examples of CD-ROM and of videos, and was directed to the website, all of which was useful.

2. Areas of needed improvement

- While SERVE has become visible in its region, little has been done to assert its presence in national research and development settings, e.g. AERA, nor has much been published in refereed journals or more popular vehicles like the Phi Delta Kappan.
- Regarding the videos, one panel member felt that while the scripts were good, the products could have been enhanced with “bullets” of major points made, and that the camerawork left something to be desired.

3. Recommendations for improvement

- Several panelists expressed the wish that SERVE staff would carry its best products to a national audience. Where it has done so, e.g., in the case of the ASCD and NCSD awards, SERVE has received well-deserved recognition. More to the point, it has made valuable contributions to the field, bringing to a wider audience critical insights and strategies--the results of hard work and serious commitment to a search

for solutions.

- The same panelist from 2., above, would like to see the Lab do more videos. She suggested they be used not only in workshops, but be aired on public and or local television (or at least clips) as part of education human interest stories.

B. To what extent is the REL focused on customer needs?

1. Strengths

Despite distance and diversity of state contexts, the customer's voice is heard at SERVE thanks to the remarkable infrastructure the REL has created. Effective connections operate from the state policy level, to the governance level, to the implementation level. Its state-level analysts offer the Lab strong partnerships with potential for direct impact on policy. Their networks are both formal and informal, and through them, the Lab's influence stretches across the region. SERVE's Board ensures consultation from the range of constituencies. Here, replacement of a higher education presence with representatives from the world of education research made for a more appropriate connection given SERVE's clients and mission. Furthermore, the Lab has augmented these strengths with a Teacher Advisory Board. At the program and project levels, SERVE identifies customers and "extends the warm hand of Southern hospitality," to quote one reviewer, to schools and districts in all its six states. The Lab uses customer feedback such as Delphi techniques and focus groups (at, for example its regional Forum), surveys, and informal networks to determine customer priorities and responds accordingly, tailoring products, training, and other services to the intended audience, and refining them as needed. The REL has documented a close match between what the Lab thus determines its actual and potential clients need and want and what it does programmatically.

2. Areas of needed improvement

- Although the SERVE Technical Proposal gave prominence to regional needs

stemming from its demographics, actual products and descriptions of activities are relatively silent on who is being served. This is unfortunate given the population's comparative poverty and the presence of a large number and proportion of minorities and isolated rural residents (See data in I., above). To be sure, "small, rural" does receive mention and several programs are in fact most likely addressing the needs of minorities (Title I, CSRD, and the Delta project). Still the Lab's documents do not reveal the extent of service to those most in need. Its data gathering deficiency in this regard does not permit it.

3. Recommendations for improvement

- The Lab should carefully examine the extent to which there is minority representation in all its programs, and quickly correct identified deficiencies. In any case, data should be collected to disaggregate this information. So for example, "teachers trained," and "students impacted," should be displayed by race, and for that matter, gender. While this disaggregation need not appear in every data display, there are settings in which its absence is a glaring omission. Hopefully, the data bases can be redesigned, for example, to reveal the numbers of minorities trained/impacted/served and the proportion of, e.g., schools/students/teachers in a given intervention site that are minority. Similarly, urban, rural and suburban sites, etc. should be identified in the data.

V. Outcomes and Impact

A. To what extent is the REL's work contributing to improved student success, particularly in intensive implementation sites?

1. Strengths

Anecdotal information suggests SERVE programs are uniformly doing good things and accomplishing much for children. But hard data regarding student success are generally absent in the REL's various programs. For example, in the school improvement effort where there is no direct SERVE intervention in the learning process, schools nevertheless reported that where they had incorporated the planning strategies taught by SERVE, reading scores went up, e.g., from 33 percent to 53 percent in one third grade class. What appears to have been changed is the culture of the school and thus a myriad of elements. Likewise, the Senior Project is credited with revitalizing the senior year for many students and for bringing out gifts and sharpening skills in

many participants. In other assessment interventions where SERVE data document student improvement, the numbers are either too few to be able to draw firm conclusions, or what is available also is anecdotal.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The panel could not find sufficient demonstration of impact across the programs because student outcomes did not receive a high enough priority in the program design stage. This is unfortunate because student results are the proverbial “bottom line.” Issues related to what succeeded and what did not are especially relevant in applied research such as is typically done by the Labs. This should be considered not only for standardized tests but for alternative assessments, too. Here, student work must be analyzed as it is essential to anchor “how good is good enough.” Without benchmarks, there are no standards in place to drive instruction or to measure levels of achievement in the classroom.

3. Recommendations for improvement

SERVE needs to have program effectiveness demonstrated in terms of student impact, including academic outcomes. More pre-post testing needs to be done to document outcomes that can be clearly linked to the program being implemented. This would best be achieved by having this incorporated in the design of the program so that training would be consciously directed toward achieving the best possible student outcomes. Specifically, SERVE needs to shift gears in its professional development strategy, including that for alternative assessments, to focus more on student work.

B. To what extent does the Laboratory assist states and localities to implement comprehensive school improvement strategies?

1. Strengths

The REL excels at working with schools to implement comprehensive school reform. School improvement is one of the Signature Works of SERVE and it has addressed this mission with dedication. Since 1996, training for school improvement teams has involved over 2,000 participants in 4-day sessions. A large number of publications have been produced to assist these teams in research and decision making. The REL's annual School Improvement Forum, which draws around 450 attendees, features SERVE programs and numerous other ideas from practitioners and others about ways to improve schools. SERVE's current work with Title I schools and with the CSRD moved the Lab even more visibly into the position of advising others on school reform options.

2. Areas of needed improvement

- Most of the work completed by SERVE is relevant to the national debate about reform. However, the REL does not have high visibility beyond the Southeast. Its products do not always appear among the references cited in training manuals and reports. By framing its work in the context of research-based "best practice" and demonstrating how it contributes to the field, SERVE could increase its reputation and gain more widespread recognition. To do so, however, its programs must be drawn together more closely, its work must exhibit more up-to-date sets of references, and more careful research must be done.
- There was some concern on the panel about uniformity of Lab effort among the SERVE states. Right now, certain efforts are concentrated in one or a few states, while other efforts are concentrated elsewhere. There is insufficient coherence across the region and variety among its target sites was not demonstrated.
- Likewise there was disappointment that the collaborative effort of RELs in the Delta region was not continued from the last contract and that SERVE's continuing efforts here were not stronger, given the great need.

3. Recommendations for improvement

The points below relate together to the concerns just expressed about deeper research and wider implementation.

- For its various client groups, SERVE should develop comprehensive research summaries related to their various activities and show how these activities contribute to school reform. Other activities in Labs and centers around the U.S. should be referenced if relevant. Increased collaboration with researchers could help to improve study design and ensure effective outcomes. In addition, working with well-known researchers can lend credibility to SERVE work and help to ensure that it gets published. SERVE staff needs to write some articles about their well-done projects and seek collaborators or other pilot sites in the region and outside of the region (working with the relevant Lab).
- The panel is not advocating a formula approach to resource allocation, but does suggest that the Lab think about how its programs and resources are distributed among the several states, so there is more visibility throughout the region.
- More attention should be given to the purposeful selection of participating school and district sites to ensure variation in key demographic and contextual factors within SERVE implementation sites. It is clear that in many cases schools and districts were selected because of their individual requests. One advantage of a more proactive recruitment effort within identified political and demographic categories is that this could enhance understanding of those interventions which work and those which do not under varying local circumstances.
- Given the extent of poverty and isolation in the Delta, the panel hopes SERVE would take the lead in reviving collaborations of the last contract and support the panel in its plan to encourage Secretary Riley to forge a multi-agency effort there.

C. To what extent has the REL made progress in establishing a regional and national reputation in its specialty area?

1. Strengths

Under the current contract, SERVE has the leadership role in Early Childhood Education among the Laboratories. It has enlisted the collaboration of several other Labs, the National Center on Early Development and Learning and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. These organizations can help to disseminate the information SERVE has

developed and will be developing. SERVE also presents its specialty well on the web and links it to other sites with related information. There is evidence that it is establishing a reputation in those sections of the region in which the Early Childhood unit has intervention programs, especially North Carolina and Florida. The Lab also has contributed respectable publications to the field, notably Terrific Transitions, and disseminated them, but mostly in the region.

2. Areas of needed improvement

The program is not sufficiently strong to be a true specialty area yet of the Lab, though the foundation is being laid. There is a sense that it is still searching for its identity and direction—probably because of staff turnover and vacancies in the first years of the contract. Even so, the Lab began to make its mark. With a full-time director and a full complement of staff, the Lab should be able to better develop its specialty and achieve its place. Once this is begun, SERVE should strive to do more seminal work, worthy of being published in national refereed journals.

3. Recommendations for improvement

Though it is of course suitable and desirable to popularize and extend knowledge, e.g., through pilots, the Lab should take care not to duplicate work being done by others. Rather, SERVE should find a voice of its own among those organizations that are working in this field and seek to make a unique contribution. It could begin by pursuing more partners and alliances, e.g. through contacts of the National Education Goals Panel among others. Organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children can help in dissemination and also suggest how documents can be used. Finally, the Lab should develop a dissemination plan and consider placing documents on-line.

VI. Overall Evaluation of Total Laboratory Programs, Products and Services

Launched to serve its regional constituency just nine years ago, the SERVE Lab has grown into a full-fledged, contributing member of the national Laboratory fraternity and is steadily and conscientiously fulfilling its self-proclaimed mission. Its programs are consistent with the broad education focus of the states of its region and of the nation as a whole—school improvement and assessment. At the program and policy levels, its cadre of able and experienced educators has made excellent connections across the region and, in some cases, across the nation. They have brought training and materials to hundreds of principals and thousands of teachers who otherwise would not have known about key ways to organize, teach, and assess, or about strategies to restructure faltering schools and turn around students.

Regarding its customers, SERVE is committed to fully engaging them in a continuous, interactive manner. At the state, district, or individual participant level, a question posed is likely to be met by a prompt SERVE response in an ambience of intimacy and concern that has, in turn, generated genuine client support. The highly committed Board, along with other key stakeholders, likewise has a high regard for staff and the work they do. Lab products and publications have reached hundreds, and in some cases thousands who undoubtedly benefit from the information transmitted concerning, e.g., alternative assessment, school leadership, and early childhood education, to cite just three examples. While from the start some of the information produced was strong, in recent years the quality has definitely improved, witness the awards and other recognition the REL has received.

Leadership difficulties that slowed progress in the early years of the contract, notably in the specialty area, seem to have been largely overcome. The Lab has many strong programs, products, and services in place, is evolving organizationally, and is now positioned to perform at

an even higher level.

This potential can only be achieved, however, if steps are taken to address programmatic inadequacies noted in the body of this report. For example,

1. Improve the research base from which the REL derives its programmatic thrusts and seek exposure in the field--both to get input from researchers and from content experts currently working elsewhere on relevant topics, and to share with the wider audience of peers and practitioners what SERVE is doing.
2. Aiming for greater programmatic cohesion in SERVE, internal collaboration must be considerably expanded, both within the REL and between REL and non-REL activities.
3. Student impact must receive a much greater priority and be featured in the initial program design. For alternative assessments, benchmarks must be established to distinguish qualitatively among outcomes.
4. External programmatic evaluations should be employed and become part of the QA system.
5. Extra care must be taken to comb the literature so that SERVE uses/adapts what has been already produced, freeing up staff and resources to make original contributions and extend the frontiers of applied knowledge.
6. Improve the data base capabilities so that there can be better demographic profiles of who exactly is getting assisted, trained, or otherwise is benefiting from SERVE intervention and service.
7. Take care that given interventions are not concentrated in one or two states, but that there is distribution across the service area. Build the variables into the study design so that outcomes can be pegged to these variables, e.g., gender, race and location.

In sum, SERVE has achieved much. It is now time for it to move to the next level of quality by demanding even more of itself as an institution.

VII. Broad Summary of Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Strategies for Improvement

1. Strengths

SERVE's primary strength is the quality and commitment of its staff. This cadre of professionals operates in an apparently congenial environment led by an experienced executive director, heading a tight management team of top executives. Operations are overseen by an involved Board of Directors and supported with materials and encouragement by the University of North Carolina. SERVE has enhanced its own strength immeasurably by establishing numerous alliances and partnerships outside the Laboratory, documenting many successes as a result of these collaborations.

The Laboratory has focused its programmatic efforts on areas of great need in the region—assessment, school improvement, and early childhood education, and held conferences and training sessions to reach many educators with information on programs and strategies of potential effectiveness. It has been prolific in the generation of numerous and varied publications whose worth was enhanced by an effective quality assurance process. But it also has proven to be effective users and disseminators of available products and service. It has been wise, as well, in positioning policy analysts to mutually serve the state education agencies and the REL. It has demonstrated a keen understanding of the political dynamics and social protocols respected in the region, which has opened many doors and kept them open for SERVE to both contribute and benefit. Its needs sensing and evaluative capabilities are strong and these tasks are carried out conscientiously.

In the process, SERVE has developed a unique and highly effective infrastructure. It has the capacity for disseminating research-based practice and moving research to scale by impacting

both policy formation at the state level and policy implementation at the district and school level. The potential for this system to effect positive change in the region is truly profound. The recent reorganization and staff expansion, plus the promise of stable leadership now positions SERVE for an explosive impact on the region.

2. Areas and Strategies for Improvement

Intra-Lab communication needs to be facilitated to enhance the potential for synergistic effects. While the recent reorganization was a tremendous improvement, the panel feels that presently there are too few structural and managerial mechanisms available to promote collaboration within the Lab to the optimum degree.

Regarding products and materials, the panel would like to see the Lab use more nationally available information and resources. One purpose would be to avoid any duplication of effort and thus employ Lab resources to add to the field. A second purpose would be to ensure staff and customer access to the most current research information and effective strategies for school improvement.

A dissemination strategy devised jointly by program personnel with the publications unit needs to be developed for REL products. Information should reach the maximum audience in the region and beyond, and in a variety of ways. Publications should generate presentations in schools, workshops, regional and national conferences, and translate into offerings in journals, magazines and TV to heighten public and professional awareness. This recommendation applies to all program areas, but particularly to the specialty topic of early childhood education.

Evaluation parameters need to be far more finely tuned to get at program impact and prepare for long-range planning. This will allow the organization as a whole to raise the quality of work with consistency. For example, the Lab should be able to report programmatically by

state, impact by SES, race, and locale. And in this regard, probably the greatest need for programmatic improvement lies in determining desirable student outcomes before programs are launched and gearing program strategies to obtain these outcomes accordingly.

Several of these recommendations speak to enhancing quality control. In addition, the panel wishes to emphasize the necessity of review or consultation by external content experts in the QA process. The panel is looking for greater rigor in assessing that a given strategy was “proven or effective.”

Finally, the panel observed that two of its concerns could be more fully addressed by involving others beyond SERVE. The Delta region with its chronic poverty and lack of educational and employment opportunities has been mentioned already. The panel recommends that SERVE explore with the other Labs that participated in the Delta project under the former contract reviving joint efforts there again. But the panel realizes that even this effort would be small compared to the great need. For this reason, it plans to propose to Secretary Riley that an integrated, multi-Lab, multi federal agency initiative be launched to impact the area through greater coordination and collaboration.

Second, while the panel has recommended changes to data gathering design for SERVE, it also suggests that its recommendations be taken to the other Labs for possible consideration by their Evaluation Coordinators. These coordinators have been developing cross-Lab performance indicators under the present contract. This might be an opportune time to ask them to consider our proposal for richer demographic data so that data gathering would be comparable across the Lab regions.

SERVE has made tremendous strides since its founding. It has overcome serious obstacles and produced valuable work despite these obstacles. From a solid foundation, it is now

in a position to better realize its original vision for the region. The panel hopes that this report will be accepted as a guide for future planning and will enable SERVE to advance with confidence in its future.